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"OUT OF GREAT TRIBULATION."

A SERMON

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF

MRS. SARAH R. BAKER,

PREACHED JUNE 2, 1867,

BY

A. C. THOMPSON, D.D.,

PASTOR OF THE ELIOT CHURCH, ROXBURY.

BOSTON:

PRESS OF GEO. C. RAND & AVERY, 3 CORNHILL.

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MRS. SARAH REED BAKER, wife of ABEL BAKER, born in Cambridge, Dec. 22, 1791, — having buried seven out of eight children, — after a most painful and protracted sickness, died in Roxbury, Lord's Day morning, May 26, 1867, aged seventy-six years, five months, and four days.

“IN HOPE OF ETERNAL LIFE.”

SERMON.

“OUT OF GREAT TRIBULATION.”

These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. — *REV. vii. 14.*

THE apostle, on Patmos, witnesses a succession of most wonderful scenes. He hears enrapturing and startling sounds; is addressed by elders and others,—by a voice, as it were of a trumpet, and by the Son of man, whose voice is as the sound of many waters. Still the venerable man of fourscore and ten, though now in the spirit for so considerable a time,—sufficient, we should think, to allow the first shock and all timidity to pass away,—ventures as yet to ask no questions.

What awe must come over even the most mature minds when once translated to heaven! Pertness, forwardness, or loquacity has no place there. The aged John is deeply reverent. He gives rein to no prying curiosity. Enough for him that he sees and hears what the Holy Spirit presents in vision.

Nothing escapes his observation. His eye, however, is directed to one quite conspicuous company of celestial inhabitants. They stand in a group. The fact of association and classification is thus suggested. No

feature of the heavenly state is more plainly made known than this. Who is not aware of the peculiarly enlivening influence of sociality upon all services and enjoyments, especially when persons of similar experience and marked congeniality are brought together? Isolation is a rebellion of one. Asceticism and permanent solitude are anti-Christian: like every thing else abnormal, they must remain outside of the celestial city. Allowing for due temporary retirement and meditation, we must believe that world to be eminently a social one, and that, upon certain occasions at least, the inhabitants are distributed on the principle of elective affinities, and resemblance in anterior history.

That portion of the jubilant host now especially engaging the eye is a prominent one. Citizens there exhibit diversity of features, manners, excellences, and adaptation for service. It is possible, that, in the New Jerusalem, there will be a great variety of services; that, while direct adoration and praise hold a large place in the more active occupations, there may be a difference answering to tastes, temperaments, and capacities, as endlessly varied as those of earth. Some of them may be of a very humble character. If so, there will not be wanting those just as ready for such offices as for any, and in such they will be as happy and as acceptable as others; for the truest mark of a holy mind is cheerful contentment with present posi-

tion, and an honest endeavor to make the most of it. None will feel above or disinclined to any branch of appointed duty. There is more humility there than here; and will the highest saints be otherwise than like angels, all of whom are ministering spirits? "I regard myself," said a truly Christian person, "in the church and in the world, as a part of a building. It is not for me to pretend to be a polished corner-stone, or an ornamental pillar; but if I am only a little crumb of mortar, though lodged out of sight in the building, it is honor enough for me. The building would not be complete without me; and it would be a sin for me to withhold even that little crumb of aid. However small the place assigned me, it must be filled." So, doubtless, do all feel, who, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, when once the scaffolding is taken away, and a holy temple unto the Lord stands revealed.

But the group now attracting the apostle's gaze stands high. It exhibits peculiar splendor. Their garments have a singular brilliancy. "And one of the elders answered, saying unto me," — replied to my perceptible though unexpressed desire to know, — "What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?" The inquiry is put, not to draw out information, but to fasten particular attention. "And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest." We might suppose that one so aged, so well informed, so

fully inspired as John, would require no informant. But this world, even with apostolic gifts and advantages, is a place of ignorance compared with heaven. Elders are needed as teachers of those newly arrived and less informed. This one, who is at home there, and knows all the celebrities deserving special consideration, would have the apostle mark that shining company, and know whence they came.

Who are they? What was their place and condition on earth? Were they the noble born, the learned, the courtly, the renowned? So a heathen man would anticipate. The unenlightened, spiritually unenlightened, mind of every age and land is addicted to hero-worship, and peoples the realm of happiness with demi-gods,—those who make a figure here by their acquisitions, their social position, or mental superiority. The lively oracles estimate men on a very different scale,—the scale of moral worth. In the eye of God, men are valuable and honorable according to that which he does for them, and the use they make of it. We notice the elder's reply to this aged seer. "These are they which came out of"—what? out of kings' houses, out of halls of science, or halls of legislation; out of the circles of high refinement, or the ranks of enterprise and prowess? "These are they which came out of great tribulation." A prominent place and a radiant robe are assigned to those saints who have experienced severity of trial.

That severity comes in many forms. There may be literal martyrdom, — the surrender of life in testimony to the truth. Noble indeed is the army of such. It was headed by the first believer, who went from earth to glory. But Cain has had a terrestrial immortality. He lives still. Ever and anon he steps forth to lay low some brother, whose only offence is that his deeds are righteous. Caves of the earth, dens of wild beasts, dungeons, the stake, the scaffold, the battle-field, have had their thousands who pass through great tribulation. We cannot help noting the fact, that the only individual name of a deceased saint honored by our Lord with mention, since he ascended on high, is that of a faithful martyr, Antipas, slain at Pergamos, where Satan dwelt.

There is a social, protracted martyrdom, requiring every day hardly less of faith and courage than are needed once by the man who seals his testimony with blood. So long as godly persons remain out of heaven, and sons of Belial out of hell, David will not want his Shimei, nor Paul his accusers. The royal psalmist declares, "God hath set me up for his mark : his archers compass me about." Maliciously skilful and unwearied they are, uttering all manner of evil falsely.

There is the martyrdom of severe sickness. What months, what years, of bodily distress are often endured by the children of God ! Almost without interruption,

and with only occasional mitigation, they suffer on, shut away, for the most part, from the alleviations of social life and religious ordinances. Now and then is one bound to the rack, lo! these eighteen years.

There is the martyrdom of mind. This may come in the form of derangement; all normal action being suspended, and reason giving place to dismal delirium or maniacal frenzy. Men of sanctified genius, like Cowper and Collins, become victims, as well as those from other walks, grades, and ages of Christian life, who are to be found in the lunatic asylums of different lands.

It may take the less decided form of melancholy, always connected with bodily disease; the nervous system being enervated, and the mind becoming a prey to illusive convictions, to most whimsical and painful hallucinations. The suffering is real, and a real cause exists, though the particular fancy be unfounded. Great indeed is the tribulation from this source.

There is also the form of mental decay. Paralysis, epilepsy, or other affections, laying a relentless grasp upon one's system, the mind sympathizes. The brain, its immediate instrument, being impaired, torpor of perceptions, and dimness of recollection, come on. The failure of mental activity may be imperceptible; but decline, gradual or rapid, takes place, and some-

times consciously to the patient, occasioning him the keenest grief.

“He cries, These things confound me ;
They settle on my brain :
The very air around me
Is universal pain.”

To witness or experience dilapidation of body and mind in old age is sufficiently trying ; but how much more so amidst all the freshness and high hopes of youth ? Sadness and anguish beyond utterance does it occasion both the sufferer and his friends. Such are forms of great tribulation, out of which some of God’s dear children pass to heaven.

There they are arrayed in white robes: their attire has a marked character of soft and exquisite purity and brilliancy. The choicest beauty and sweetest influences of glory seem to concentrate on them. Their raiment probably resembles that of our Lord when he was transfigured, which became “white and glistening,” — “exceeding white as snow.”

But how came that raiment so spotless and shining ? “They have washed their robes, and made them white,” — not in streams of charity, not in baptismal waters, not in the tears of penitence, not in the blood of patriotism or of martyrdom, but “in the blood of the Lamb.” Fires of the furnace, in seven-fold intensity, cannot purge the deep stains.

Jesus' blood alone cleanseth us from all sin. Again and again let it be reiterated, not great tribulation, but the atoning fountain, purifies from the dust of earth, from the dark blots of guilt. While, however, purification is effected only by the blood of sprinkling, and while every saint is made meet for glory by the same efficacious cleansing, those who came out of great tribulation are advanced to a high place, and have raiment of peculiar beauty.

There is suggested a lesson of resignation and hope, in view of the severe and more protracted trials of life. Not only are we to recognize the general fact, that God's discipline of his children here is preparatory to their place and service in heaven; but also that great tribulation is with a view to greater eminence in glory. There is no more reason for discontent under a heavy than under a light pressure of his hand.

God teaches with peculiar distinctness, not only that he will have us suffer as well as do his will, but bear long, and bear to the end; that the time for authorized murmuring will never come; that no duration of debility, and no amount of pain, is an apology for hard thoughts of Him "who maketh sore," and with whom a thousand years are as one day.

Good men, like Job and Jonah, are sometimes under the temptation of impatience to die; friends, too, are impatient to have them in heaven; but all

such feelings are an impeachment of the wisdom and goodness of God. He detains no one here too long ; no one suffers too much. Whose *active* service is indispensable to him ? The ardent, energetic Saul of Tarsus, when converted, asks, " Lord, what wilt thou have me do ? " but our Lord sends even him word, " how great things he must *suffer* ; " and Paul's apostleship of multiplied trials was no less remarkable or needful than that of his preaching.

It may be that some us, in contemplating extreme cases of this kind, have prayed unconditionally for the convalescence of a dear friend, or have wondered that God did not grant a speedy release. Not so, however, the sufferer, if the discipline has been fully sanctified to him. " Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt," is the cry : " my Father appointed it ; I would have nothing otherwise."

Will not the observation of all present bear me out in the remark, that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ seldom shines forth in a more beautifully balanced and sustained spirituality and general development of Christian graces, than may be seen in situations of enduring distress ? Unquestioned and mature as piety may have been previously, still, does not the sufferer usually appear in the lasting ordeal to be refined as silver is refined, and tried as gold is tried ? Does not tribulation work patience and the whole charming cluster of virtues which are the outgrowth of that primal and fruitful stock ?

The highest attainment which any one can make is to be cheerfully submissive to the will of God ; desirous of nothing else than for his glory ; to be, to do, or to suffer just what and where he pleases, — an attainment seldom so conspicuous elsewhere as on the couch of distress, or in the living martyrdom of reverses, afflictions, and persecutions. Severe and lengthened sufferings are God's sieve and fan, that leave little or no visible chaff behind : they are the furnace whence come brightest vessels of honor for the upper sanctuary. Martyrs of the stake, the sick-room, and the hospital are wanted there. For the special sphere and service assigned, *all* this great tribulation is needful. Not a soul in that honored company could do with one day less of the long sickness, or one less pain of the lingering torture, endured here. Such present trial of faith being much more precious than that of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, will be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ, when all present mysteries of suffering piety will be cleared up, and lost in the glory resulting to God the Father, Son, and Spirit, for ever and ever.

Six months ago, we began to miss from our solemn assemblies one who had long worshipped with us. Her immediate departure from earth was looked for, so severe was the attack of disease, and so excruciating her bodily distress. From that time onward, we

saw her dying daily; and yet her life prolonged beyond all expectation, the same wearisome days and nights, still, still appointed her, the suffering of a nature that precluded material relief from human hands. Why was it? "In her tongue is the law of kindness:" that lineament in the Bible-sketch of an ideal woman was prominent in her. Kind words flowed most readily from those lips now sealed in silence. As we stood beside her remains, nothing so convinced us that she was no longer with us, as that we heard none of the pleasant words which were invariable when we had met her heretofore.

The law of kindness was in her heart. Was it not out of the abundance of the heart that her mouth spoke? It would seem as if she gave all diligence in "adding to brotherly kindness, charity." So deep, so uniform was it, as to be more than mere kindness: it was sympathy.

That law dwelt in her *hands*. Her good will found expression otherwise than in words simply. Kind deeds were her occupation. Those hands, so long, so constantly busy in thoughtful ministrations, are now folded in motionless repose; and who of us has known one that surpassed her in the sweet charities of life, in skilful, unwearied acts of well-doing?

It was a law with her through the sixty years of married life. It governed. A kindness not fitful was

the life of her life. Of her it might be truly said, "Charity never faileth."

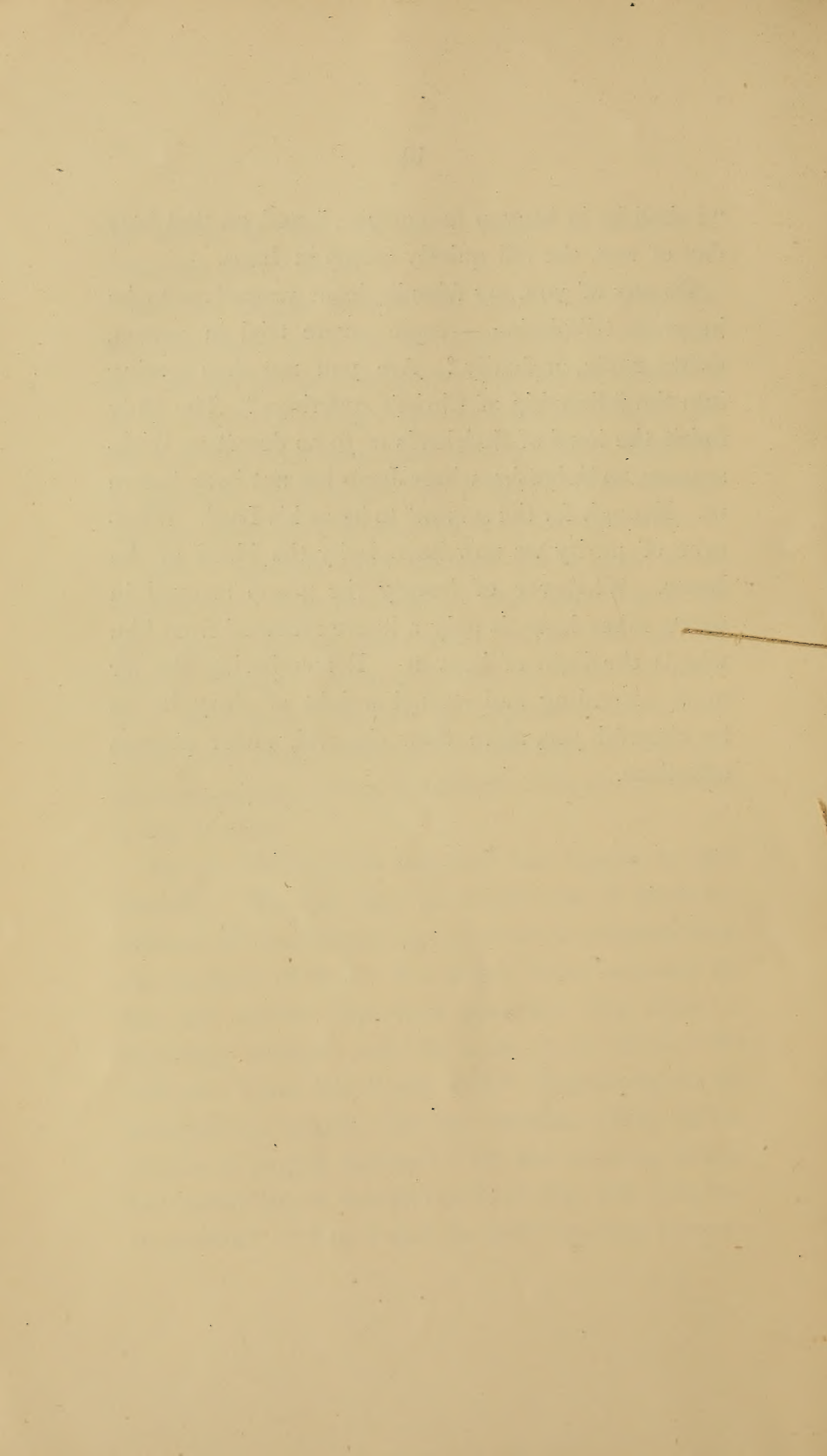
She has taught us what an amount of delightful meaning there is in the word neighborly. She created around her an atmosphere fragrant and cheering as the breath of spring. She won us to kindness; for her acts did more than make happy: they suggested a principle; they taught us a lesson. The manner and the spirit were more even than the liberality.

Such a character and example are a great social benefaction. The kindness of that heart which has now ceased beating, made many another heart all the kinder. What a lesson of unselfishness did she teach us! Who ever witnessed an ungracious act in her? More truly might it be said of her than of the Empress Josephine on her death-bed, "She never caused a tear to flow."

By his dealing with her, God has taught us profoundly. We see that no tenderness of heart, no amount of beneficence, can purchase exemption from the furnace of trial. We should have selected for her the easiest departure possible; God chose a lingering anguish; and his word to us all is, "Be still, and know that I am God." Repeatedly, in uncomplaining wonder, did she exclaim, "Why is his chariot so long in coming?" till the evening before last Lord's Day it was said to her, "You will be better to-morrow." "Yes, I shall be well," was the answer:

“I shall be in heaven to-morrow ;” and, on that holy day of rest, she fell quietly asleep in Jesus.

Do any of you, my friends, deem yourselves to be in great tribulation, — some severe trial in person, estate, name, or family ? Are you not thus coming into the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings ? The Holy Spirit, the hand of God, leads us to no desert, no Gethsemane, no Golgotha, where Jesus has not been before us. Enough for the servant to be as his Lord. Whatever of purity we now have is by the blood of the Lamb. Whatever of beauty the group arrayed in white robes have, is only a lustre reflected from him who is the light of heaven. Remembering the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, let us be cheerful, yea, more than cheerful, under present afflictions.



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